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# MY SPIVAK IS BIGGER THAN YOURS: (MIS-)REPRESENTATIONS OF POLYAMORY IN THE PORTUGUESE LGBT MOVEMENT AND MONONORMATIVE RHETORICS

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I seek to contextualize the fight for the (already accomplished) legal recognition of same-sex marriage in Portugal within the wider frame of LGBT activism in this country (Cascais, 2006), and in the interplay of several differently positioned activists. Within this frame, I will analyze how the theoretical work of Miguel Vale de Almeida (2008), in seeking to legitimize the fight for monogamous same-sex marriage, seems to have engaged in identitary Othering and misrepresentation vis-à-vis polyamory. Such misrepresentation is contingent to the non-empirical confounding of polyamory and polygamy, along with the essentializing of gendered dynamics in intimate relationships, and the erasure of lesbian and gay ethical non-monogamous relationships. Thus, by deploying similar straw-men fallacies as those used by conservatives to fight against LGBT rights, polyamory is (apparently) successfully critiqued and shown to have to subsume or silence itself to an alleged strategic essentialism required for passing legislation in favor of same-sex marriage.

This paper concludes with a reflection of the (political) dangers of petitioning for silence of Othered identities, and how such petitions are based on the same identitary violence and disciplining that LGBT movements have been trying to fight for decades, and that draws on homonationalism, homonormativity and heterosexual privileges to affirm itself.

## KEYWORDS

polyamory, mononormativity, LGBT, activism, strategic essentialism, Portugal

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to produce a critical account of a very specific point in time within the history of LGBT activism in Portugal: that of the events surrounding the legal recognition of monogamous same-sex marriage<sup>1</sup> in Portuguese law and how some of the key LGBT

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, the full expression “monogamous same-sex marriage” will always be used as a way to bring visibility to the fact that “marriage” has, amongst most western contemporary readers, a presupposition of monogamy already attached to it. As Daniel Chandler (2013b) argues, to use the expression “monogamous marriage” is to utilize “the marked form of an unmarked concept”. The very same author points out how the unmarked form of a concept (which would be, in this case, just “marriage”) “is typically dominant [...] and therefore seems to be ‘neutral’, ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ [...] drawing no attention to its invisibly privileged status”, while simultaneously making it so that “the boundaries of foundational oppositions, seemingly ‘absolute’, have to be policed because ‘transgressions’ are inevitable” (Chandler, 2013a).

organizations positioned themselves in relation to this political issue and especially in relation to one another.

This legal hallmark happened in 2010, but most of the events that this paper refers to took place in 2008 and 2009. The present paper isn't intended to give a thorough analysis of the debates surrounding the approval of monogamous same-sex marriage in Portugal, but to look at the rhetorical intersection between such a political goal and *other* political goals, potentially rendered invisible or unworthy to enter the political arena, and particularly the position assumed by several groups and activists in relation to PolyPortugal, the only group in Portugal that is dedicated specifically to polyamory activism.

For the sake of contextualization, let it suffice to say that this fight for monogamous marriage comes after the legal extension of *de facto* cohabitation rights to monogamous same-sex relationships, after the Constitutional inclusion of a reference to the prohibition of discrimination based on sexual orientation, and a hardening of penalties against hate crimes and same-sex domestic violence. Given how long it took for the LGBT movement to mature and attain a modicum of autonomy (its own voice/s), it is not without some surprise that so much has been formally gained. At the same time, these changes in legislation do not signify a smooth or enlightened attitude towards all gender and sexuality issues – as a counterpoint, it was Portugal who 'invented' the notion of monogamous civil marriage without adoption or full parental rights, actually inscribing in the Law the prohibition for same-sex couples to adopt (Oliveira, 2013, p. 71). A much more nuanced, descriptive and critical historical exploration of the evolution of LGBT movements in Portugal is available elsewhere and is beyond the scope of this paper (Cascais, 2006; Oliveira, 2013; Santos, 2013).

To this end, I shall focus my attention on the interpretation of two practically identical texts put forward by Miguel Vale de Almeida (2008, 2009), who was at the time a Member of Parliament with the Socialist Party and one of the strongest advocates for monogamous same-sex marriage, and at the same time a well-renowned researcher and academic in Portugal. These texts, however, both presented in academic conferences (one in Portugal, the other one in Brazil), are a reply to another text, written by Sérgio Vitorino (2008), of the *Panteras Rosa* [Pink Panthers], a queer and left oriented LGBT activist group, which was later complemented by one other text (Vitorino, 2009) and also a group interview with other members of the Pink Panthers (Maia, Louro, & Vitorino, 2009).

The first section of this text will then be dedicated to presenting, summarily, the views and arguments used both by Vitorino and by Vale de Almeida, followed by a critical analysis of the rhetorical tropes and politics involved. I will pay special attention to the creation of dichotomies and hierarchies between different modes of producing social and political change and knowledge, with a focus on the ironies produced when such dichotomies are created through a process of apparent challenge to dichotomous thinking.

The second section will look at how Miguel Vale de Almeida (mis-)represents polyamory as being a prime example of the radicality that stands outside concrete politics, and also attempt to provide evidence for the counter-factual claims presented by the author, as well as analyzing the rhetorical role that polyamory is made to occupy, and its connections with discriminatory processes of Othering.

The third part, and the one which gives this paper its title, will focus on the notion of “strategic essentialism”, mobilized as a leitmotif in Vale de Almeida’s second text, and stemming from Spivak’s work. The aim of this part will be to resituate the meaning of strategic essentialism in face of Spivak’s more recent evaluation of the uses and limitations of this political strategy, demonstrating that Vale de Almeida’s claims about strategic essentialism do not actually fit the concept.

The fourth and final part will draw on critiques of homonormativity, homonationalism and neo-liberal politics to contextualize the issues that surround this process of Othering, especially those that come from LGBT groups and who end up legitimizing the discrimination against the Others this movement produces. This paper intends to draw attention to how wide-spread and cyclical are the mechanics of coming-into-acceptance that include a disidentification against what is deemed ‘extreme’ or ‘unacceptable’ (precisely the place that such coming-into-acceptance leaves open for others to occupy). It is also a response to, and a re-echoing of, Wilkinson’s (2013, p. 7) call for scholars to “think about how mononormativity plays out in other nation-states”<sup>2</sup>.

The analysis that follows seeks to address conjointly three different factors: the *textual analysis* of what was written, and which includes the critical questioning of the rhetorical strategies deployed to achieve specific ends; the *modes of textual production* involved, and how they relate to academic practices and *ethos* of citing, referencing and developing evidence-based engagements with reality and with politics; and the *political performativity* of the texts, as they have fulfilled political and activist intentions and agendas, and cannot be separated from their political usefulness in advancing (some) rights while fighting against others.

## 2. TEXTUAL DIALOGUE, OR WHO’S ‘WE’?

When commenting on the recent history of the Portuguese LGBT activism, Cristina Santos identifies a tension between, on the one hand, the “multilayered collective struggle” that allows for what she calls “syncretic activism” and, on the other hand, a degree of “internal dissent in relation to the degree of importance and prioritization” (Santos, 2013, p. 57) of other struggles and demands vis-à-vis the struggle for civil monogamous same-sex marriage. This dissent grew

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<sup>2</sup> Though it is also beyond the scope of this paper, the present analysis should be read in the wider context of how different rhetoric devices are being used by different social actors to defend marriage and propriety in Western societies (e.g.: Emens, 2004; Sheff, 2011; Wilkinson, 2010, 2013).

and became more concrete over time, and reached a high point when, in 2008, Sérgio Vitorino sent an email to several LGBT organizations, called “Marching for what and with whom? The Portuguese LGBT movement at a crossroads and some impending choices”<sup>3</sup>, which has since been published online. In it, Vitorino talks about the tiredness felt by the first-wave LGBT activists, that many new generations feel misunderstood within the activist movement, the closing down of activist possibilities and their reduction to “corporate politics”, a “tendency for an uncritical conservatism of heterosexism’s mechanisms of integration and reproduction” and, ultimately, a “desire for non-creative and non-transformative ‘normalization’” (Vitorino, 2008).

The text does not deny the importance or validity of fighting for monogamous same-sex marriage, but it does criticize how such a struggle is made by “presenting the LGBT population as a replica of the [...] conservative straight couple ideal”, sacrificing the “affirmation of the reality that relational and familiar diversity constitutes”, and basing itself upon a very male and white, middle-class standard of values. Vitorino also points to a contradiction between a movement that, on the one hand, supported a call for a national strike in 2003 and, on the other hand, claimed that PolyPortugal’s presence in the organization of the LGBT Pride March is reason enough for some of the organizations to refuse to participate in the March (as was the case with the *Rede ex aequo* in Oporto). Spread throughout the text other issues, such as the depathologization of trans\* people, are also brought to the fore to exemplify other highly volatile points of contention.

As an alternative, Sérgio Vitorino makes a call for intersectionality and identifies that conflict as a “growth crisis, a painful transition” where “new blood” is not just entering the movement but, “is partly already there”, and is facing resistance from the “older” sector of the movement.

Miguel Vale de Almeida’s response came shortly after, and took the form of a presentation at the Feminist Congress, held in Lisbon, in June 2008. (A remark should be made here: Vale de Almeida himself wrote that he had another theme planned, based on Gayle Rubin’s famous “Thinking Sex” and the notion that the LGBT movement must be feminist; an intriguing informational tidbit considering the emphasis that Rubin placed on the politics of excluding non-normative sexual practices such as non-monogamy in her analysis.) Vale de Almeida used Vitorino’s text to perform an “analysis of *discursive formations*” (Vale de Almeida, 2008, p. 5). According to Vale de Almeida, Vitorino’s text makes three important assumptions or rhetorical moves:

- “a) it seems to intend to institute a policy of radicalness through the creation of a normalizing Other, ultimately dependent on heteronormativity;
- b) it seems to partake in the notion of an emancipatory or even revolutionary historical becoming, utopic in its nature, that relegates the Other to a time-stuck conservatism;
- c) and does both these things by using some “symbolic dramas” that allow the instauration of clear diacritical signals that point to a “parting of the waters” (Vale de Almeida, 2008, p. 4).

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<sup>3</sup> All translations from non-English to English are my own, as is the responsibility for any mis-translation or loss of sense in the process.

Placing himself as this stereotyped Other (or as its mouthpiece), Vale de Almeida then goes on to clarify that there are three errors that lie behind these assumptions: he posits that asking for equality is not adhering to a given model (where equality is defined as “equality in accessing what there is (marriage)” (Vale de Almeida, 2008, p. 5)); that the critique of polyamory is a matter of tactics rather than of values; and, ultimately, that Vitorino’s text is based on a “confusion between two levels of reflection and action in any social movement, especially those that deal with costumes – that of policies and that of cultural critique”.

It is on this third point that most of the rest of the text is focused. According to the text, concrete political actions involve the “management of the possible”, which operate in a different sphere and at a different speed in regards to “radical cultural critique” (Vale de Almeida, 2008, p. 7). It is then unjust, according to Vale de Almeida, to equate a liberal perspective (of that ‘Other’) with a backwards one, one that does not understand the History to come. This accusation of backwardness would be employed, one assumes, by a post-modern vision of non-fixed identities – the same one that makes “good bed partners (even if unintendedly) with a hyper-liberalism that assumes that people choose to be what they want, without social constraints, as a reproduction of the relationship between the economic agent and the market” (Vale de Almeida, 2008, pp. 8, 9), in what can be considered a gross misrepresentation of post-modernist/queer theory. For the author, then, it is possible to do:

“three things at the same time: to think, with social theory, about the history, sociology and anthropology of gender and sexuality; to promote a radical cultural critique which includes the visibility of diverse experimentations and aesthetics of life; and to practice a politics of the possible and of the concrete in seeking to fulfill the liberal project in the sexuality and gender area. I defend that there should be no strategic hierarchy between the three, but a dynamic tension and a tactical separation” (Vale de Almeida, 2008, p. 10).

The risk of having cultural critique play too big of a role is that it cannot, apparently, be directly translated into political action without losing the “capacity for transforming the concrete situations in the field of [social] rights”, and so these two approaches “cannot attack each other when it comes to strategy” (*idem*).

What I would now like to demonstrate is how the three rhetorical moves pointed out in Vale de Almeida’s analysis of Vitorino’s text are, themselves, also present in his own text. I intend to demonstrate that irony is unwillingly thus produced, and Vale de Almeida’s critique can just as well be turned against itself, becoming more than what the author intended, opening up the space for a meta-critique. This unintended irony occurs in three distinct points that the author raises:

1. *Radicality*: the first critique is that Vitorino’s text claims for itself and its views a radicality that would be lacking in the Other thus created (meaning, in the position Vale de Almeida identifies with); but after exposing what he considers to be a false dichotomy between cultural critique and the politics of the possible, Vale de Almeida then says that “in the current circumstances, given how the liberal project in the field of sexuality is still unfulfilled, the *greatest radicality* might, curiously, be in the fight for formal equality”

(Vale de Almeida, 2008, p. 9, emphasis mine). By using 'radical' as a positively connoted value, Vale de Almeida's text reinstates the power of 'being radical', and reinstates radicalness as a desirable category of political action, or at least as a pointer to its value in "transforming people's lives for the better". The actual meaning of radicality here is not clarified, though. If the politics of the possible is indeed something separate from the cultural critique then it is not clear how the liberal project of formal equality is able to access or address itself to the root of the issues – the original meaning of 'radical' – when its objective is assumedly *not* that one. This becomes particularly complicated by the assertion that "'liberal' can end up being more 'radical' and vice-versa", and that "this is evident when thinking more critically about the opposition between identitary politics and queer politics, in which the first one might even be closer to forms of radical cultural critique" (Vale de Almeida, 2008, p. 11). No argument is offered as explanation for this role reversal, nor is a definition of this radicality put forward to help clarify if there is more than one radicality at stake here.

2. *Historicity and teleology*: at the same time that the text refutes what is an apparent historical teleology created by Vitorino when talking about "new blood", maintains the notion that there is a liberal project that might eventually be fulfilled by the deliberate action of social actors mobilizing according to that project. But, it must be said, Vitorino's text is equally clear in pointing out that the idea that "it is coming" is linked to the observation that it is "partly already there", and in supplying ample examples of other communities and activist groups/topics that are already mobilizing and *planning* and/or executing a push for more visibility, more rights, more voices. It is, again, ironically unclear how it is that the liberal project is not historically teleological (in the sense that it foretells a future to be constructed by willing people), while the queer project (which is just as contingent on the efforts of willing sexual citizens as the liberal one) is considered to be historically teleological.
3. *Parting of waters, roles and diacritical signs*: Vale de Almeida's text criticizes the idea that there is "old blood" and "new blood", and that certain specific events function as markers that allow someone to distinguish between the old and the new, the identitary and legalist, versus the queer and grassroots activist; according to him, Vitorino's text creates unnecessary dichotomies. And yet, at the same time, the text creates a series of separate (although related and connected) functions for radical cultural critique and for the politics of the possible, while mentioning the dangers of mixing *those* waters (that is: losing the power to effect social or political changes). Here, it is the modes of engagement with the social fabric and the (supposed?) results that operate as the diacritical signs that serve to separate these two discourses. Making the difference even more salient (thus making the critique of dichotomizing even more ironical), the "radical cultural critique" is presented as being *impossible* to translate into "political action". This, in turn, serves to reinforce the notion that the 'liberal project' is more radical (and thus

more valuable, worthy, dignifiable), predicating that evaluation on the same dichotomizing gesture that is criticized in Vitorino's text.

Given the above apparent contradictions between critique and counter-critique, I would now like to advance the idea that this, too, creates a process of Othering, that should give pause in considering what 'radical' means to the 'liberal project'. Thus, and again pointing out that the concepts of justice and equality seem to be central to that project as it is presented by Vale de Almeida, I would like to follow the argument (and more particularly, the questions behind it) put forth by Santos (2013, p. 61): "it is no longer enough to claim equality (whose equality?) and celebrate legal changes in the name of inclusive justice (whose inclusion? whose exclusion? whose justice?)."

So, who's 'we'? Who is encompassed by this "formal equality", to use Vale de Almeida's term, who does it Other, and by what means?

### **3. POLYAMORY, BUT NOT REALLY – '[CITATION NEEDED]' AND MISREPRESENTING THE OTHER**

I will now focus on polyamory as the main example of this excluded Other and attempt to demonstrate how the rhetoric of exclusion is employed by Vale de Almeida to produce, legitimize and strategically necessitate the erasure of the act of exclusion itself – in such a way that the exclusion becomes (theoretically) unidentifiable, as there is (apparently) nothing to exclude.

Vale de Almeida's paper puts the matter to rest in one fell swoop:

"Polyamory is not a problem. This is because polyamory presents itself as a lifestyle choice, a choice to follow a given set of values within the context of amorous relationships. It does not present itself as a political claim for legislative or rights' changes"; "given that it's an ethical choice in the field of romantic relationships, it has nothing to do with a transformative agenda of the conditions of citizenship" (Vale de Almeida, 2008, pp. 5, 6).

What is perhaps the most jarring thing about this excerpt is its utter lack of citations, especially considering that this was a presentation at an academic conference. Polyamory is presented self-evidently as a "lifestyle choice", without any theoretical development, without any pointers to authors that might back-up or disavow that (non-)definition; later, in the 2009 version of the paper, a clearer definition appears - "polyamory describes amorous arrangements with more than one partner, with mutual consent and without a project of fidelity" (Vale de Almeida, 2009, p. 4) – but without any sourced references<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, and given that it makes an assumption as to what polyamory represents for polyamorous people (and how one can only

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<sup>4</sup> The focus on love and the non-problematization of the meaning of "fidelity" as a supposed marker of non-polyamorous (be it 'monogamous') relationships are very contentious points in this definition, and do not align with most theory or research on the subject or on the origins of the word (Cardoso, 2010, 2011; Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse, 2006; Keener, 2004; McCullough, 2003; Mint, 2008; Ritchie & Barker, 2006).



become polyamorous), this (mis-)presentation of polyamory is emphatically absent of empirical explorations of the subject that might legitimate such a claim.

Equally lacking is a more in-depth exploration of the overlap (and the non-overlap) between polyamory and polygamy, and between gender and polyamory – according to the text, there would only be a political claim behind polyamory if it were “polygamy”. The word “polygamy” is used here with an unclear meaning – does it mean the possibility of a civil, legal marriage between more than two people?, or does it mean just the existence of a sexual connection between more than two people?

The next excerpt adds to the conceptual confusion: “[...] if there were [a polygamous demand for legal recognition], it would be, and rightly so, contested, since mutual consent would not be enough to allay the fear of deep gender inequalities” (Vale de Almeida, 2008, p. 6). Does “polygamous” here actually mean ‘polygynous’? And where do the “deep gender inequalities” come into play, unless it was referring to a strictly heterosexual relationship pattern? Are heterosexual relationships the ones that might suffer from gendered issues, and would those fears be then effectively allayed if it were a purely lesbian/homosexual polygamous family? (Seemingly not (Santos, 2012).) And although Vale de Almeida is clear to point out that polyamory is *not* polygamy, the text also seems to imply that, definitionally, polyamory *cannot* make any political demands without becoming (heterosexual, patriarchal?) polygamy, bringing with it “deep gender inequalities”, which would then be, quoting Vale de Almeida, “rightly so” contested. Further, such a phrasing refuses to acknowledge that the meaning and practices behind the word “polyamory” might differ between people and be connected to different practices and that “social and legal marginalization of polyamorous affiliations may exacerbate inequality within these relationships” (Ertman, 2005, p. 491). Once again the irony returns: only heteronormative practices are allowed recognition in the field of politics.

By virtue of the above, then, polyamory is seemingly outside of an identity politics framework, prohibited from belonging there by being “a lifestyle choice”. This is, of course, the very same argument that has been leveraged for decades against LGBT people, who stand accused of ‘choosing to be gay’ (or otherwise deviant) and of having the possibility of ‘converting’ or ‘healing’ back into proper (hetero-)sexuality. And although Vale de Almeida’s text clearly and repeatedly states that individual lives should not be judged and criticized, it still deploys the exact same rhetoric that many in the LGBT movement (and within both Social and Natural Sciences) have tried to invalidate, by demonstrating the natural-ness of homosexuality and other forms of sexuality (thus removing ethics and choice from the framework, and making those forms of sexuality – the ones that are backed by ‘natural’ arguments – ontologically superior to, in this case, polyamory). It also ignores that in ‘homosexuality’ as in ‘polyamory’, essentialist narratives exist alongside anti-essentialist ones (e.g.: Foucault (1994) or Halperin (2002), and Keener (2004)).

At the same time, Vale de Almeida claims that “polyamory has a political value”, but only a very specific one: “the opening of the possible, the cultural critique that demonstrates that there are other ways to live”; and even so, “little is actually new in polyamory”, providing as examples the “sexual libertarianism of the utopic socialist projects of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Reich’s and others’ sexual radicalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century or, skipping ahead in time, May 1968” (Vale de Almeida, 2008, p. 6). This erases continuities and discontinuities between non-monogamous projects that have happened across centuries of distance and fails to account for the growing media representation and partial globalization of a specific English word/notion, its seeming endurance to the passage of time and its democratization. In short, it seemingly denies polyamory its political, theoretical, contextual and anthropological depth (or even the need for such things), equating it with other (white, European and privileged) forms of consensual non-monogamy, and restricting its political usefulness to the role of simply being a reminder of Otherness.

The argument from Vale de Almeida’s perspective is, then, that polyamory is not excluded and Othered, because there is fundamentally nothing to exclude. There is no possible translation to the plane of concrete political action that would be defensible, either, and therefore the ‘real’ political existence of polyamory is doubly disavowed. This argument is only supported through straw-men fallacies, or misrepresentations, of polyamory and the confusion created by the lack of a systematic literature review of consensual non-monogamies in general (of which polyamory is a subset), especially as it pertains to the relations between polyamory and feminist theory (Cardoso, 2009, 2010; Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse, 2006; Sheff, 2005, 2006), which, given the context where the text was originally presented, is incomprehensible.

Furthermore, the notion that polyamory is not translatable, in an ethical manner, into law, contradicts the fact that there are several scholarly references that deal with just that *and* with the relation (be it pro, con, or other) between polyamorous activism and monogamous same-sex marriage (Ashbee, 2007; Aviram, 2008; Black, 2006; Emens, 2004; Ertman, 2005; Myers, 2009; Strassberg, 2003), as well as authors who argue that the definition of sexual orientation should be expanded to include polyamory under the aegis of any anti-discrimination laws already in place (Tweedy, 2011). All in all, if monogamy is regulated by the State, its contestation must (Vitorino, 2009), per force, be also at the level of what Vale de Almeida would term “concrete politics”. Thus, I argue here that pushing polyamory outside of the scope of “concrete politics” constitutes a form of Othering, which results in an exclusionist theoretical positioning, with practical consequences for the lives of consensually non-monogamous people.

Even more problematic is a derived assertion put forth in Vale de Almeida’s text, that further advances this exclusionist rhetoric: “what there is, is the danger of a social and media reading – wrong, for sure, but no less dangerous because of that – of polyamory as polygamy, which would hurt what some (me, for example) consider to be a priority, since it’s closer to being accomplished”; and, further down, “[polyamory] cannot be used to alienate those who, in exerting their right to choose, would want to follow other relational models” (Vale de Almeida,

2008, p. 6). Therefore, beyond being interpreted as untranslatable to the realm of practical politics, polyamory is further conceptualized as being potentially hazardous. Not by, or in and of itself, but inasmuch as there is the possibility that it might be “wrongly” interpreted by the media and by society. There are, then, three elements to consider here: first, there is the admission of a slippery slope fallacy as such; second, there is the hypothetical fear of both a media panic and a moral panic (although, again, the scholarly references to these widely studied and theorized phenomena are absent); third, there is the contention that, in spite of not validating such (hypothetical) arguments, there is a need to act upon them, and thus to grant them their full power. This is because, curiously, there is an apparent reversal in the power positions occupied by different social actors – even though the legal recognition of monogamous same-sex marriage is “closer to being accomplished” (with all that it implicates in terms of social recognition and leverage), such an accomplishment risks being undone, since polyamory would be used to alienate the defenders of monogamous same-sex marriage by being confused with polygamy.

Such an assumption seems to come from a simplistic view of how moral and media panics work especially, following both recent and not-so-recent criticisms (Buckingham & Strandgaard Jensen, 2012; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995), when in such a multi-mediated and plural world the notion of a uniformly polarizing media stance is nigh impossible, where several social actors compete and have access to different media as well as being granted a modicum of exposure. Even taking into account the assertion that “all media are *not* created equal, that some are *vastly* more powerful than others” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009, p. 100), and thus more able to function as gate-keepers and agenda-setters, what remains unexplained is why the text assumes that any efforts to oppose such a (hypothetical) moral backlash would be fruitless, and that the alienation of monogamous same-sex marriage defenders would be successful. This again seems to ignore the fact that the (admittedly very sparse) media coverage that exists around polyamory in Portugal<sup>5</sup> is, overall, not pathologizing, demonizing or otherwise imbued with the characteristics that are usually the hallmark of what defines a media/moral panic (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009), but rather is celebratory and even historically teleological in presenting polyamory as ‘new’ or as ‘the future of relationships’ (which is obviously problematic too (Zanin, 2013)). It also overlooks LGBT movement’s (sans polyamory), and the organization of which Vale de Almeida is an important figure (ILGA Portugal) in particular, capacity to attract media, political and social attention – or the power differential it creates.

This does not mean that public exposure to the idea of polyamory would be inconsequential at all or that the slippery slope would not be utilized politically, only that the specific outcomes are unforeseeable, and even more so when it comes to the way it would affect a high-level political decision such as the legalization of monogamous same-sex marriage. Besides, if the

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<sup>5</sup> Some of it is available here: <http://poliamor.pt/imprensa.html> (Portuguese only); other references, including materials from Brazil and Spain, are also available here, with a synopsis in English: <http://polyinthemedia.blogspot.pt/search/label/Portugu%C3%AAs>

objective of the liberal project is, according to Vale de Almeida (2008) to secure happiness for citizens, then visibility (in its political sense) would also benefit polyamorous people, and thus constitute a beneficial consequence that the text doesn't seem to comprise.

Again there is a trace of irony, since the above argument – which is about identity and political purity – is routinely used against the liberal LGBT movement when it comes to: *monogamous same-sex marriage*, namely by those that see it as a devaluation of the meaning, importance and symbolism of 'marriage'; *trans\* people*, for muddying and confusing 'the waters' of the sex-gender system; and *bisexual, asexual or pansexual* people, for confusing and polluting 'sexual orientation'. If it is possible to educate the public about these issues, why would it not be possible to do the same around polyamory, given that there is not conflict of interests between advocating for polyamory and, for instance, monogamous same-sex marriage? It appears as though the phantasmatic threat of moral/media panics operates as the sole validator of the exclusion of polyamory in this regard.

The third element of how Vale de Almeida's text (mis-)represents polyamory, concerns the actual intersections between LGB people and polyamory or other forms of consensual non-monogamy. The text talks addresses the fact that many people "question marriage itself, to reject heteronormative forms of behavior and relationships, to question jealousy and sexual exclusivity, etc, *just like* generations and generations of gays and lesbians who had to practice cultural, discursive, performative and aesthetic configurations that would *question heteronormativity*" (2008, p. 6, my emphasis). This comparison supposedly instantiates a differential between two supposed separate groups. The usage of "just like" effectively draws a connecting line between what is called "cultural critique" and the everyday experiences of a micro-politics of intimate citizenship (Plummer, 1994), offering up a third element beyond that of "concrete politics". But at the same time, it seems to create a difference between the experiences of people who question marriage, jealousy and *sexual* exclusivity, and gays and lesbians – according to the text, the first group fights mononormativity (another academic concept that fails to find its way into Vale de Almeida's paper, from Pieper and Bauer (2005)) and the second fights heteronormativity. If one(s) is "just like" the other(s), then they are not *the Other(s)*.

By separating "Us" from the "Others", a double erasure is created, one that does not take into account the fundamental role of intersectionality in experiences of discrimination and alienation against standardized sexualities, affects and expressions of gender. I would like here to reiterate the comment that Vale de Almeida made about his original intention to talk about "heteronormativity as a structuring condition both of sexism and of homophobia" (Vale de Almeida, 2008, p. 2) using the work of Gayle Rubin. Her work is indeed of use to this paper, since in the 'Charmed Circle' she draws, monogamy is an important part of what constitutes acceptable (and thus, privileged, and potentially oppressive) sexuality and intimacy (Rubin, 2007). For Rubin, all of these different elements are not interchangeable, and all need to be

considered when giving an account of the critical interactions between sexually marginalized groups and their normative surroundings. This is why I use the term ‘double erasure’ – the tensional engagement that responsible non-monogamous people have with normative gender rules and heterosexism on the one hand (Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Sheff, 2006; Wilkins, 2004), and on the other, the fact that the “performative and aesthetic forms” they engage in, to fight a heteronormative society, actually include a sizable dose of consensual and ethical non-monogamy. One example of this is Elisabeth Sheff’s (2014, p. 71) ethnographic work, where she points out that “there is considerable overlap between polyamorous communities and other subcultures including [...] other sexual minorities such as kinksters, bisexuals, swingers, and gays and lesbians”.

Another source is the 2012 ‘Loving More’ Survey (Cox II, Fleckenstein, & Bergstrand, 2012) made for polyamorous and other responsibly non-monogamous people (with about 4000 self-selected respondents, and heavily biased towards an Anglophone audience), where 52% of women said they had relationship(s) with someone of the same gender or with people of the same *and* of the opposite gender; and about 23% of the men said the same thing. This means that 40% of the ‘Loving More’ sample was at the time (also) having non-heterosexual relationships; elsewhere more studies supporting these findings are mentioned (Robinson, 2013, pp. 25, 29).

Although these statistics are far from representative, they raise the plausible hypothesis that a relevant portion of the LGB community deals not only with heteronormativity, but with mononormativity and its inherent sexism constantly, in their performative and aesthetic pursuits – an intersection of discriminations that, once again, raises the pressing questions quoted above: “whose inclusion? whose exclusion? whose justice?”. The dichotomy between non-monogamous people on the one hand, and LGB people on the other – even if we shorten that to ‘LGB people who want to be in a legal monogamous same-sex marriage’ – becomes a fictive and ideological one. And even for those who might desire such a marriage *and* non-monogamy – with the accompanying ‘happiness’, social recognition and equality – it is doubtful whether having that part of their experience (past, present or future) erased, denied or excluded in the very same context of the groups and associations that are fighting for ‘their’ rights and ‘their’ happiness (the one that comes from a life free of discrimination) actually brings said happiness; nor does it dispel the normative power behind happiness (Ahmed, 2010).

For this third critique, I would like to, again, make a comparison with the discriminatory practices that are present in mainstream heteronormative discourse. By defining certain terms (marriage, love, family, sex, sexuality) as ‘inherently’ heterosexual, heteronormative society makes use of its definitional privilege, and erases sexual, intimate and amorous experiences that might not fit into those definitions. This erasure, like the one identified above, is double: non-heterosexually identified people are erased or made to feel ontologically inferior, and non-normative acts, even by hetero-identified people, are also subject to this erasure or

unintelligibility. It is as if gay/lesbian/bisexual and straight were necessarily non-intersecting groups, as if identities and acts did not, at times, become confusingly enmeshed.

While the previous section had concluded with a critical analysis of Vale de Almeida's text through the lens of the author's critique of Vitorino's essay, this section tries to draw substantiated parallelisms between the rhetorical strategies utilized to define and arguably exclude polyamory from even the possibility of effecting direct political changes, and those used by hetero-mono-normative sexist and patriarchal institutions to attempt to exclude the LGBT movement from effecting direct political changes itself.

#### **4. IS "POLITICS OF THE POSSIBLE" STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM?, OR WHO'S GOT THE BIGGEST SPIVAK?**

This section intends to show why Vale de Almeida claims that this Othering is actually a valid political stance under the concept of "strategic essentialism", but also attempts to demonstrate how such an argument can only be made by misrepresenting what strategic essentialism is and how it operates.

Vale de Almeida's "politics of the possible" seems to be based upon another premise, not yet analyzed here: the "strategy" that governs the applicability of the principles of the "concrete politics within western democracies", which "works, indeed, in an identitary mode". Within the context of Vale de Almeida's 2008 text, this is a rather cryptic remark, but the 2009 version makes it clearer in its title, which integrates Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism". In that paper, Vale de Almeida defines strategic essentialism as "a kind of temporary solidarity aimed at social action" (Vale de Almeida, 2009, p. 2). Spivak herself points towards strategic essentialism as a way to create a place from which the subaltern could speak and defy the privileged group's ability to define the subaltern and speak as if on the subaltern's behalf (Spivak, 1994). Spivak also adds that strategic essentialism is not an acceptance of 'essence' as truth, but as a creation that requires constant critique and deconstruction, so it does not become, itself, essentialized, or crystalized in a way that stops being strategic.

Thus, given the above considerations on how polyamory is rhetorically misrepresented, two questions follow: is there solidarity between Vale de Almeida's critique of Vitorino's text and the PolyPortugal activist group?, and, is the subaltern speaking?

To engage with these issues, I would again turn to intersectionality and its operation in the accumulation of experiences of Othering and discrimination. If indeed there are exclusionary narratives being deployed in the representation of polyamory by Vale de Almeida's text, as I've argued, and they are being made in the name of a social group (engaged in said strategic essentialism) that is about to have a highly symbolic political victory, does this not point to shades of (relative) privilege and, thus, to multiple levels of subalterity being created or

maintained? Can the denial of political relevance to a given identity (or to the subjects beyond it) be considered solidarity, and the creation of the conditions necessary for more voices to make themselves heard? Beyond the affirmation that cultural critique is necessary, what strategic and theoretical consequences are derived from the critique that polyamory admittedly raises? In promoting a specific form of exclusion, this strategy creates silence, and denies the notion of a participatory, encompassing and respectful laying out of plans that would give voice to all sorts of subalterns.

In fact, and given some of the re-appropriations of her work, Spivak herself has, in a way, distanced herself from the notion of strategic essentialism, especially where a claim of strategic essentialism is made while social actors concurrently engage in actions that are contrary to the ideal informing strategic essentialism. Spivak is particularly clear when she claims that “the critical moment does not come only at a certain stage when one sees one’s efforts succeeding. It is not in that moment that we begin to decide that we had been strategic all along” (Spivak, 2012, p. 4), which seems a fitting discussion to what the Portuguese LGBT movement was on the edge of accomplishing.

Ultimately, it seems then that what Spivak properly understands as being “strategic essentialism” deals with a very specific context of total erasure or negation of a given social identity, where strategic essentialism would reflexively create the cognitive tools necessary to talk about and against that negation. For strategic essentialism to be deployed, the move should be, “ideally, self-conscious for all mobilized” (Spivak, 2012, p. 4). This, then, does not seem to apply to a situation of privilege that can often be seen within certain academic and social contexts, such as the one from where Vale de Almeida’s papers come from. Spivak’s concept applies rather to anti-colonialist practices where a strategy indeed exists, one “that changes moment to moment, and [where the subalterns] in fact come asserting their differences as they use the mobilized unity to do some specific thing” (Spivak, 2012, p. 14).

João Manuel de Oliveira, who also analyzes the homonormative tendencies behind the importance afforded to the fight for monogamous same-sex marriage in Portugal by resorting to Spivak and critiquing Vale de Almeida, notes that the recently passed legislation does nothing to “substantially alter the subject positions” (Oliveira, 2013, p. 72), instead maintaining the same core values as before – and thus, has little or nothing to do with the strategies put forth by Spivak. In fact, for Oliveira, this is a prime example of how “even a political effort for equality can be made to signify a privileging of the already-privileged” (2013, p. 72).

Such a description seems to me a far cry from the request (imposition?) for silence implicit in the aforementioned media/moral panics, or in the denial that there is a possible practical political side to polyamory. Quite the contrary – it seems as if a utilitarian calculation of gains and losses is being done, and the social group with ‘the biggest Spivak’ (meaning, the biggest apparent claim to being subordinate, with the best apparently thought-out strategy) is the one with the rights to mobilization, to discourse, to representation, to acknowledgement of political

validity, “when one sees one’s efforts succeeding”, as Spivak puts it – a coopting of strategic essentialism.

And so, I’d like to echo a question raised by Richard Miskolci (2010, p. 5), in response to the second text of Vale de Almeida: “Wouldn’t the so called queer represent the phantasmic incarnation of the abject, within the LGBT social movement itself?” The figure of the queer (and here, particularly, of the polyamorous person as a political entity) operates then as a “catalyst for the established fears” of “social backlash” (Miskolci, 2010, p. 5), while, at the same time, the role of social critique is separated from the role of concrete politics, which Miskolci refers to as anti-intellectualism.

Miskolci identifies

“an internal resistance to the widening of the dialogue with feminism, to the creation of a more critical dialogue towards the State, and to the end of the identity model of the [LGBT] little letters that exists alongside a new conceptual and theoretical framework in the field of sexualities studies” (Miskolci, 2010, p. 10).

Cristina Santos a similar interpretation, which this paper supports – that rather than the deployment of strategic essentialism, what we see Vale de Almeida defending is the continuation of a “politics of containment, whereby controversial issues are negotiated amongst liberal and conservative sectors of society [...] to achieve a wider consensus through the suspension of radical strategies or arguments” (Santos, 2013, pp. 3, 4).

In fact, the reactions to PolyPortugal are one of the examples Santos offers, calling it “striking” that such arguments came from “an LGBT committee organizing an LGBT march which, one would have thought, would hold the principle of diversity as non-negotiable” (Santos, 2013, p. 5), thus creating processes of (necessarily hierarchical) Othering, where only some forms of relationship “are given legal and cultural recognition at the same time that other relationships are distinguished as those of sexual dissidents who are construed as unworthy, illegitimate and improper” (Santos, 2013, p. 7). Santos links this to homonormativity and homonationalism, arguing for a closer look at the relationship between State and activism, and pointing out that “the excessive juridification of LGBT politics [...] seems to assume that legal frameworks can deliver fairness and justice per se”, in stark contrast to Vale de Almeida’s naturalization of “management of the possible” as being another way to define “concrete politics” (Vale de Almeida, 2009, p. 5) – which places Vale de Almeida’s arguments far away from strategic essentialism.

## **5. CONCLUSION: A “POLITICS OF THE POSSIBLE” DEPENDS ON SOMEONE IMAGINING THE POSSIBLE**

In another text, co-authored with Patrícia Louro and Bruno Maia (also from the Pink Panthers), that functions as a sort of response to Vale de Almeida and to the situation of the Portuguese LGBT movement of the time, Sérgio Vitorino writes that “‘the possible’ is mutable,



according to the existing conditions, but also according to the ambition, vision and giving-ins of its actors” (Maia et al., 2009, p. 134). For these authors, a narrow understanding of “the possible” makes a “clean slate of diversity in the name of the interest of the majority, thus hurting the visibility of diversity” (Maia et al., 2009, p. 136).

Even though this paper focuses on critically engaging with Vale de Almeida’s texts, it is nevertheless worth mentioning that, in the activist context of Portugal, where individual people and collective organizations sometimes seem impossible to pick apart, a given theoretical (cultural?) critique such as is undertaken by Vale de Almeida, oftentimes has very concrete political applications. This is one such case – ILGA Portugal, along with Rede ex aequo, spearheaded the push against PolyPortugal being part of the organization of the LGBT Pride parade in Lisbon during 2008 and 2009 (Vitorino, 2009), in spite of PolyPortugal having helped to found the Oporto Pride parade in 2006 and having participated in its organization ever since. In the case of the Oporto Pride, the Rede ex aequo refuses to associate itself publicly with polyamory, and thus refuses to participate in the organizing of the Oporto Pride parade.

Writing on behalf of the Pink Panthers, and calling out to the participation in 2009’s Oporto Pride March, Vitorino again questions the double standards applied to what constitutes an “LGBT topic”, given that anti-racism is accepted as one, but polyamory is not (Vitorino, 2009). He also casts doubts on the notion that being more moderate is a necessity to winning the debate on monogamous same-sex marriage, instead pointing to a strategy of silence as a strategy of oppression, such as the one that trans\* people already have to go through, being doubly silenced in the process. What’s more, Vitorino adds that “Miguel Vale de Almeida ignores that polyamory is a political project, by the simple fact that it deals with State-regulated relationships”; therefore, even in the absence of a “cultural critique of relationship exclusivity”, polyamory would always and already be political (Vitorino, 2009).

Polyamory, then, needs to be included alongside other even-less-visible minorities in the movement’s construction of what is “possible”. The narrowing down of this ‘possible’ constitutes a “politics of containment” (Santos, 2013, my emphasis) and a “consolation citizenship” (Oliveira, 2013, my emphasis). Although these authors utilize different expressions and make separate analyses, they follow a common reasoning, in considering the complicity between a heavy focus on the legal possibility of monogamous same-sex marriage and neo-liberal, homonormative and homonational perspectives, that ends up reproducing problematic gender, class and even heterosexual privileges.

Thus, “consolation” and “containment” are in fact two aspects of the same dynamic. As per Oliveira’s critical reading, the ‘proper’ response that comes out of neo-liberal imaginings of what is ‘possible’ would be the legal recognition of monogamous same-sex marriage as an undisputed victory, an “end in itself for citizenship”, but that in the end maintains “an illusion of democracy that only applies to some social positions” and that “only includes those that can already be included” (Oliveira, 2013, pp. 73, 75). Santos (2013, p. 8) talks about the “excessive

juridification of LGBT politics” as a containment strategy that intends to bring about that very same, and very ‘proper’, ‘possible’ (with which some citizens can then be consoled) – what is contained is the corporeal, sexual, erotic messiness of embodied citizenship that might threaten the emergence of a clean juridical (LGBT?) subject worthy of being bestowed a role in an imagined social struggle for ‘The Future’ (and where promiscuity would have no place, or at least no political place).

This emphasis on ‘The Future’ is what Lee Edelman calls

“reproductive futurism: [...] an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations” (Edelman, 2004, p. 2).

Such futurism is eloquently pointed out by Cristina Santos’ (2013, p. 7) analysis of the then Prime Minister’s speech in defense of the law for monogamous same-sex marriage. In it, he made “use of conservative yardsticks of the next generation (‘our children’), tradition and honour”. Returning to Vale de Almeida, we see that the ‘politics of the possible’ his texts defend are a prime example of conceptualizing “every political vision as a *vision of futurity*” (Edelman, 2004, p. 13), bringing with it “a logic of repetition that fixes identity through identification with the future of the social order” (2004, p. 25); such a repetition is precisely what confirms and maintains the privileges discussed above.

For Edelman, resisting this closing down of what is possible means refusing futurity as the leitmotif for political action, or imagining politics beyond (and besides) futurity and social reproduction. As Oliveira (2013, p. 76), and Bruno Maia *et alli* (2009, p. 135) make clear, reducing this argument to pro- or anti- marriage (of whatever form), or to pro- or anti- juridical struggles is to simplify a much wider critique of representativity, political visibility and legitimacy affordance to different bodies, performances, erotic and emotional lives; it is also to overlook the fact that there are no inherently contradictory objectives or irreconcilable strategies (Sheff, 2011, p. 510)

Instead of purifying Plummer’s (1994) sexual citizens and their narratives, a politics of the possible can and *should* also be about the possibility of being dirty, transgressive, ultra-minoritary, undefined or undefinable – but never of being oppressed, silenced and forcefully rendered apolitical.

Such a politics can never forget that supporting “the idea that coupledness should be the marker of citizenship” (Wilkinson, 2013, p. 7) “may in fact contribute to the structural inequalities and problems that society faces” (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 52). Overall, this paper intends to give some insight as to how some proponents of monogamous same-sex marriage will employ similar rhetorical devices and operations of Othering as those used by conservative anti-LGBT social actors, towards other sexual and intimate dissidents, thus combining homonormativity with mononormativity.

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